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‘For How Long Can Your *Pīharwāle* Intervene?’: Accessing natal kin support in rural north India

SHRUTI CHAUDHRY¹

University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Email: schaudh2@exseed.ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in rural Uttar Pradesh, this article contributes to debates on married women’s relations with their natal kin. It compares women in ‘regional’ marriages (that conform to caste and community norms with a relatively small marriage distance) with women in ‘cross-regional’ marriages (those that cross caste, linguistic and state boundaries and entail long-distance migration). A focus on cross-regional marriage demonstrates how geographic distance cuts women off from vital structures of support. At the same time, even for regional brides, natal kin support is complicated: relative proximity does not guarantee support. Factors such as caste, class, poverty, the gender of children, notions of honour and shame and stage in the life-course work together in complex ways to determine the duration and kind of support available. By focusing on marital violence, marital breakdown and widowhood, the article demonstrates both the presence and the limits of natal kin support. The opportunities to draw on natal kin support vary for women, but its significance must not be understated as it alone provides women the possibility to leave, even if only temporarily. The article focuses on one form of women’s agency, an agency that is constrained and highly dependent on relationships with others (mainly male kin). In such a context of economic and social dependency, natal kin support is an important and perhaps the only resource available in situations of marital crisis: its absence leaves women in a particularly vulnerable position.

Introduction: Patri-virilocality and post-marital kin contact

Palriwala and Uberoi note that in many parts of Asia, kinship rules of residence and exogamy entail territorial dislocation, at times over a considerable distance, for young women.² This applies to the women in Barampur village (located in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh), where I carried out fieldwork in 2012-2013 to investigate ‘regional’ and ‘cross-regional’ marriages.³ Following marriage, a woman leaves her *pīhar* (natal home/village) and her *pīharwāle* (natal kin) who are ‘one’s own’ to live at her *sasurāl* (marital/in-laws’ home) amongst strangers. She becomes *parāyā dhan* (someone else’s property) as she is transferred in marriage from father to husband in accordance with the ideology of *kanyādān* (gift of a maiden/virgin). Songs following the wedding ceremony convey the sadness felt by the bride and her family at her separation from them.⁴ The initial period of transition and adjustment in a new household and village is experienced as isolating

¹ The fieldwork on which this article is based was carried out as part of my doctoral research and was supported by the University of Edinburgh College Research Studentship and Edinburgh Global Overseas Research Scholarship. I am grateful to Patricia Jeffery for discussion and her careful reading of several drafts of this article. I am also thankful to Rajni Palriwala, Kaveri Qureshi and Mary Holmes for their valuable suggestions on earlier versions of this article as well as to three anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive comments.

² R. Palriwala and P. Uberoi, ‘Exploring the links: Gender issues in marriage and migration’, in *Marriage, Migration and Gender*, R. Palriwala and P. Uberoi (eds), Sage, New Delhi, 2008, p. 28.

³ Barampur is used as a pseudonym and the names of all informants have been changed. I use regional marriage for what have been described in the literature as local/normative/traditionally arranged marriages. I define regional and cross-regional marriages in the following pages.

⁴ P. Jeffery and R. Jeffery, *Don’t Marry Me to a Plowman! Women’s Everyday Life in Rural North India*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colo., 1996; G. G. Raheja, ‘Crying when she’s born, and crying when she goes away: Marriage and the idiom of the gift in Pahansu song performance’, in *From The Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion and Culture*, L. Harlan and P. Courtright (eds), Oxford University Press, New York; Oxford, 1995, pp. 19-59.

by a new bride who finds herself veiled and silent with her movements confined to the household. As young brides, in their *sasurāl*, women cannot readily capitalise on the ‘social capital’⁵ of childhood relationships. They find themselves in a new situation positioned at the bottom of domestic hierarchies. As unmarried women they had little power, yet they had more freedom and reliable allies in their *pīhar* than in their *sasurāl*. Women continue to feel disempowered and experience ambiguity about belonging (to the *pīhar* or *sasurāl*) until a much later stage in their married lives, when the ‘cyclical nature of women’s power in the household’, enables senior women to inherit authority and become matriarchs of their households.⁶ Whilst women become increasingly ‘incorporated’ into their marital homes as they advance in their married lives,⁷ they never completely become kin to their affines. By contrast, men neither leave their homes on marriage nor lose their ‘social capital’. As Lamb argues, women’s ‘personhood’ is, then, ‘unique’ – their ties are ‘disjoined and then remade, while men’s ties are extended and enduring’.⁸

The quality of a married woman’s contact with her natal kin was discussed in several early studies that contrasted the north and south Indian kinship systems. They argued that in the north, unlike the south, due to local exogamy and the prohibition on close-kin marriage, women were married over larger distances that resulted in the ‘complete dissimilation of the bride from her family of birth and her complete assimilation to that of her husband’.⁹ Dyson and Moore argued that the greater distances over which marriages are arranged in the north compared to the south, ‘tend to constrain or erode the personal links between a married woman and her natal kin’ and the absence of support structures diminishes women’s autonomy.¹⁰

One problematic aspect of Dyson and Moore’s study is that it reflects a Hindu bias. Muslims in the north permit both intra-village marriages and marriages between close-kin.¹¹ In her account of marriage among Muslims in a rural Punjab village in Pakistan, Eglar describes how close-kin marriage and the preference for marrying daughters within close proximity facilitated the easy movement of women between their natal and in-laws’ homes.¹² In their work in rural Bijnor, Uttar Pradesh on Hindus (generally married distantly) and Muslims (usually married into nearby villages), Jeffery et al. noted that Muslim women usually did not favour intra-village marriage as they feared that it might result in interference from their natal kin in their daily lives. Yet they saw being married close to their natal kin as an advantage as they felt less cut off from their natal families than the Hindu women.¹³ Yet

⁵ P. Bourdieu, ‘The forms of capital’, in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, J. G. Richardson (ed), Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1986, pp. 241-258.

⁶ D. Kandiyoti, ‘Bargaining with patriarchy’. *Gender and Society*, vol. 2, no. 3, September 1988, p. 274-90.

⁷ R. Palriwala, ‘Transitory residence and invisible work: A case study of a Rajasthan village’. *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 26, no. 48, November 1991, pp. 2763-77.

⁸ S. Lamb, ‘The making and unmaking of persons: Notes on aging and gender in north India’. *Ethos*, vol. 25, no. 3, September 1997, p. 290.

⁹ T. Trautmann, *Dravidian Kinship*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1981, p. 291; see also I. Karve, ‘The kinship map of India’, in *Family, Kinship and Marriage in India*, P. Uberoi (ed), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994, pp. 50-73.

¹⁰ T. Dyson and M. Moore, ‘Kinship structure, female autonomy and demographic behaviour in India’. *Population and Development Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, March 1983, p. 46.

¹¹ P. Jeffery, *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah*, Zed, London, 1979.

¹² Z. Eglar, *A Punjabi village in Pakistan*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1960.

¹³ P. Jeffery, R. Jeffery and A. Lyon, ‘When did you last see your mother? Aspects of female autonomy in rural North India’, in *Micro-Approaches to Demographic Research*, J. Caldwell, A. G. Hill and V. J. Hull (eds), Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1988, pp.321-31; P. Jeffery, R. Jeffery and A. Lyon, *Labour Pains and Labour Power: Women and Childbearing in India*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1989; Jeffery and Jeffery, *Don’t Marry me to a Plowman!*

Jeffery et al. see distance as only one element in married women's relations with their natal kin. The determining factors for visiting the natal home included: seeking permission of the husband and older affinal kin, finding a substitute to do the work in her absence and having someone to chaperone her to her natal village.¹⁴

The north-south contrast as a basis for understanding access to natal kin support may also be questioned because studies on south India show that close-kin marriages and proximity to natal kin do not necessarily imply better treatment for women or protection against violence.¹⁵ This has also been noted in work on Muslim close-kin marriages that demonstrates that the fear of jeopardising kin relationships may complicate natal kin intervention.¹⁶ Ethnographies of locations in the north have shown that while a married woman departs from her natal home she neither becomes kin-less nor completely ceases to belong to her natal home. They highlight the significance of visits and gift-giving, starting at the wedding and continuing through the course of a woman's married life, in sustaining a woman's ties with her natal kin.¹⁷ Some questioned the notion of 'women as fixed residents of their conjugal homes' arguing that young brides moved between their natal and conjugal homes and served as a shifting supply of labour.¹⁸ Studies also showed that in situations of marital distress a woman could seek temporary refuge at her natal home that enabled her to negotiate better treatment from her husband and in-laws in future.¹⁹

Writings on urban contexts note a tendency towards 'matrilateral asymmetry'. In her work in urban Meerut, Vatuk discusses the 'considerable visiting' and 'mutual aid' between daughters and their parents living in close proximity to each other and great reliance on mothers, particularly in times of need.²⁰ More recently in her study in a low-income neighbourhood in Delhi, Grover notes how marriage of daughters over short distances and within easy reach helped sustain supportive ties, especially between mothers and daughters.²¹ As with studies from South Asia, in her study of marital breakdown among British Asians Qureshi noted 'a shift towards matrilateral asymmetry' as separated and divorced women turned to their natal kin 'who provided them with accommodation, childcare and financial

¹⁴ Jeffery et al., 'When did you last see your mother?', p. 324.

¹⁵ K. Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colo., 1995; N. Rao, 'Marriage, violence and choice: Understanding dalit women's agency in rural Tamil Nadu'. *Gender and Society*, vol. 29, no. 3, June 2015, pp. 410-433; P. Vera-Sanso, 'Dominant daughters-in-law and submissive mothers-in-law? Cooperation and conflict in south India'. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 5, no. 4, December 1995, pp. 577-93.

¹⁶ P. Jeffery, 'A uniform customary code? Marital breakdown and women's economic entitlements in rural Bijnor'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 35, no. 1, February 2001, pp. 1-32; K. Qureshi, *Marital Breakdown among British Asians: Conjugalities, Legal pluralism and New kinship*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016.

¹⁷ Jeffery and Jeffery, *Don't Marry Me to a Plowman!*; T.N. Madan, *Family and Kinship: A study of the Pandits of Rural Kashmir*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002; G. G. Raheja and A. Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India*, University of California Press, Berkeley and London, 1994; U. Sharma, *Women, Work and Property in North-West India*, Tavistock, London and New York, 1980.

¹⁸ D. Jacobson, 'Flexibility in north Indian kinship and residence', in *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia*, K. David (ed), Mouton, The Hague, 1977; Palriwala, 'Transitory residence and invisible work', p. 2763.

¹⁹ Jacobson, 'Flexibility in north Indian kinship and residence'; Jeffery, 'A uniform customary code?'; Jeffery and Jeffery, *Don't marry me to a Plowman!*

²⁰ S. Vatuk, 'Trends in north Indian urban kinship: The "matrilateral asymmetry" hypothesis'. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 27, no. 3, Autumn 1971, p. 287-307.

²¹ S. Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support: Lived Experiences of the Urban Poor in India*, Social Science Press, New Delhi, 2017 (Revised Edition), p. 10.

support'.²² Grover and Qureshi also discuss how natal kin support may vary depending on the type of marriage – love marriage or arranged marriage: in an arranged marriage, natal kin support may be viewed as an 'entitlement' yet requires 'continual and intense negotiation'.²³ Likewise, in his work in a garment city in Tamil Nadu, De Neve explores the significance of post-marital kin (material) support for men, too, in fulfilling aspirations of 'mobility, entrepreneurship and success in a post-liberalisation environment'.²⁴ He notes that a parentally arranged endogamous marriage rather than a love marriage is considered the best way to ensure parental and material support, though it may not always materialise.

Natal kin support has also been discussed in the growing literature on transnational marriage and the relatively smaller literature on cross-border marriages within nation states (inter-provincial marriages in China and cross-regional marriages in India) which all involve large distances between a woman's marital and natal homes. This work highlights the vulnerabilities experienced by migrant brides because geographic distance cuts them off from networks of support.²⁵ Through my work on cross-regional marriages in north India, I will contribute to this literature by highlighting the commonalities in women's experiences of long-distance international and internal marriage migration.

It is clear, then, that a married woman's relationship with her natal kin is complex. In this article, my purpose is two-fold. *First*, I use the comparison between regional and cross-regional brides to emphasize that cross-regional brides may find themselves without support, but even for regional brides natal kin support is not always forthcoming (contrary to what some have found).²⁶ Through my ethnography, I delineate the circumstances and the extent that women can mobilise the support of their natal families. I show that regional brides and cross-regional brides are similarly disadvantaged by poverty as it denies them opportunities for refuge or return in marital difficulty. Further, for cross-regional and regional brides alike, women's relationships with their natal families change over the course of their married lives.

Second, I demonstrate that natal kin relations are an important resource, perhaps the only resource for patrilocally married women, especially in rural contexts where women's lives are shaped by social dependency and a lack of material or productive property. This context is also devoid of the infrastructure of women's organizations or mediation NGOs (that provide

²² Qureshi, *Marital Breakdown among British Asians*, p. 300.

²³ Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support*, p. 60, 63; see also Qureshi, *Marital Breakdown among British Asians*, p. 123-24.

²⁴ G. De Neve, 'The economies of love: love marriage, kin support, and aspirations in a south Indian garment city'. *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 4, April 2016, pp. 1220-1249.

²⁵ E.g. T. Blanchet, 'Bangladeshi girls sold as wives in North India', in *Marriage, Migration and Gender*, R. Palriwala and P. Uberoi (eds), Sage, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 152-179; D. Davin, 'Marriage migration in China and East Asia'. *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 16, no. 50, March 2007, pp. 83-95; K. Qureshi, 'Shehri (city) brides between Indian Punjab and the UK: transnational hypergamy, Sikh women's agency and gendered geographies of power'. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 42, no. 7, May 2016, pp. 1216-1228; M. Abraham, 'Domestic violence and the Indian diaspora in the United States', in *Marriage, Migration and Gender*, R. Palriwala and P. Uberoi (eds), Sage, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 303-325; L. Williams, *Global Marriage: Cross-border Marriage Migration in Global Context*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke; New York, 2010; R. Kaur, 'Across-region marriages: Poverty, female migration and the sex ratio'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39, no. 25, June 2004, pp. 2595-2603; Qureshi, *Marital Breakdown among British Asians*; L. Schein, 'Marrying out of Place: Hmong/Miao women across and beyond China', in *Cross-border Marriages: Gender and Mobility in Transnational Asia*, N. Constable (ed), University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2005, p. 62.

²⁶ In their work on cross-regional marriages, Kukreja and Kumar argue that while cross-regional brides lack familial support, 'local' brides in contrast, can 'call family at a moment's notice to their aid' and can 'walk out of an abusive marriage...instead of suffering their lot silently'. R. Kukreja and P. Kumar, *Tied in a Knot: Cross-region Marriages in Haryana and Rajasthan: Implications for Gender Rights and Gender Relations*, Tamarind Tree Films, New Delhi, 2013, pp. 48-49.

alternative structures of support) described in certain urban contexts.²⁷ Thus, women as wives are likely to find themselves powerless in situations of marital distress.²⁸ The ability to sustain, draw on and interact in (natal kin) relations or the denial of them, sudden or over time against their own desires has paramount importance for women's rights and status within marriage. In the article, I focus not on gifts and visits to examine married women's ties with their natal kin but rather on moments of crisis. I use cases of estrangement and suicide/attempted suicide encountered during fieldwork to demonstrate that support from natal kin is at times a life-and-death matter. Thus, the significance of natal kin support for married women must not be understated as it is crucial if women are to have any bargaining power or agency in situations of marital crisis. The choice or agency available to women is a mediated or dependent agency. It is, as Simon Duncan argues in his work in a different context, not 'individual, purposive and conscious where action reflects choice' but rather 'constrained' and 'relational with other individuals and collective agents'.²⁹

In what follows, I first describe the field site, methods used to gather data and the research context.

Barampur: the context and research

This article is based on eleven months (September 2012-August 2013) of ethnographic fieldwork in Barampur village of Baghpat (formerly part of Meerut) district of western Uttar Pradesh (UP). Data were collected through a survey of village households and 38 key informants (19 regional brides and 19 cross-regional brides) were interviewed through repeat visits. Additionally, I conducted 25 shorter structured interviews. Informal conversations with people in the village, observation, gossip and rumour served as additional sources of information.

Barampur is a large village comprised of 1657 households. Its population was 9884, 5417 male and 4467 female.³⁰ It is made up of 22 castes – 17 Hindu and five Muslim. Of these, I selected five caste groups – three Hindu (Jat, Chamar and Kumhar) and two Muslim (Lohar and Teli) – for intensive study. Jats are the dominant caste of the village in terms of numbers and landownership. Significant numbers of Jats have accessed higher education and the percentage of Jats employed in government and private sector jobs is much higher compared to other castes.³¹ All other castes in Barampur were landless. Chamars are a Dalit caste and are included in the category of Scheduled Castes. They are numerically the second largest caste of Barampur and the largest Dalit caste in UP. Chamars were concentrated in casual, manual labour with about 60 per cent of the Chamar households in Barampur migrating out to work in brick-kilns for a large part of the year. Kumhar (traditionally a caste of potters) is an intermediate Hindu caste. Teli and Lohar are the two numerically dominant Muslim castes of Barampur. Kumhar, Teli and Lohar are included in the central list of Other Backward Class (OBC). Like the Chamars, some Kumhar and Teli men worked in the brick-

²⁷ Grover, *Marriage, Love, Caste and Kinship Support*.

²⁸ The Domestic Violence Act was enacted in India in 2005. This important legislation widened the definition of domestic violence but more significantly it provided economic rights, including maintenance and compensation and secured a woman's right to safe housing. In Barampur, there is no knowledge of this Act and it is unlikely that women would be able to access courts and the law when in crisis even if they did.

²⁹ S. Duncan, 'Women's agency in living apart together: Constraint, strategy and vulnerability'. *The Sociological Review*, vol. 63, no. 3, August 2015 p. 3.

³⁰ Census of India, *Primary Census Abstract, Baghpat*, Office of the Registrar General, New Delhi, Government of India, 2011.

³¹ G. Sahay, 'Dominance of Jats is unabated: Caste and dominance in the villages of western Uttar Pradesh'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 49, no. 2, June 2015, pp. 216-249.

kilns, while others were engaged in different kinds of casual work. Lohars were traditionally ironsmiths. They are relatively better-off (economically) than the other Muslim castes of Barampur. Teli, Chamar and Kumhar women engaged in waged (mostly casual agricultural) work in the village. Chamar women (wives, daughters and sisters) also worked with their families at the brick-kilns.

This research compared the lived experiences of marriage of women in regional marriage with women in cross-regional marriage. It stemmed from an interest in interrogating the moral panic around cross-regional marriages that have received much media scrutiny since the early 2000s.³² Unlike existing studies on cross-regional marriages, this research also focused on regional marriage. Regional marriages are parentally arranged,³³ endogamous (within the caste and religious group), follow norms of *gotrā* (clan/lineage) and territorial or village exogamy (outside the clan, village and neighbouring villages) with a limited marriage distance between a woman's place of birth and marriage (outside the village, but usually within the district or in a neighbouring district). In Barampur, Muslims too observe the norm of village exogamy. The marriage distance for the regional brides surveyed varied between 3-70 kilometers, with a handful married over relatively larger distances (within a radius of 150 kilometers). Patri-virilocality is the predominant pattern of post-marital residence. Given the ideal of *kanyādān* – the gift of a maiden – is to be 'accompanied by material gifts'.³⁴ Across castes (including Muslims), dowry is the accepted and honourable form of marriage payment with gifts moving in one direction with the kin of the bride being 'perpetual donors' to the kin of the groom.³⁵ According to the 2001 Census of India data, the mean age at marriage for men was 20.25 and for women 17.6 (below the legal age) in rural Baghpat. Informants said that women were generally married between the ages of 18-22, while men were married in their early to mid-20s. Once a man reached the age of 35, he was considered to have passed the 'appropriate' age for marriage. The earlier practice of marriage at a young age and *gaunā* (cohabitation) a few years later no longer existed during my fieldwork.

Cross-regional marriages, by contrast, entail crossing multiple borders – of caste (sometimes religion), language and region/state. While marriage entails territorial dislocation for most women in rural north India, the distance travelled by cross-regional brides is abnormally large, often exceeding a thousand kilometers. In Barampur, cross-regional brides had originated in thirteen districts of five states: Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal in eastern India, Assam in the north-east and Maharashtra in the west. These marriages are not self-arranged love marriages in defiance of parental authority and caste and community norms.³⁶ In most cases, they were initiated by the grooms and tolerated by their families, caste and

³² E.g. Deccan Herald, 'Brides of Bargain', 5 August 2007, <http://archive.deccanherald.com/Content/Aug52007/sundayherald2007080417143.asp>, [accessed, 21 December 2014]; Hindustan Times, 'When Women Come Cheaper than Cattle', 23 March 2014, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/when-women-come-cheaper-than-cattle/article1-1199052.aspx>, [accessed, 13 July 2015]; Tribune, 'Bought Brides of Punjab Face Societal Wrath', 17 August 2003, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2003/20030817/main1.htm> [accessed, 14 October 2015].

³³ Studies on urban, particularly middle-class Indians, in contrast to this rural context, point to greater agency for young people in negotiating marriages. See H. Donner, 'Doing it our way: Love and marriage in Kolkata middle-class families'. *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 50, no. 4, April 2016, pp. 1147-1189; C.J. Fuller and H. Narasimhan, 'Companionate marriage in India: the changing marriage system in a middle-class Brahman subcaste'. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 14, no. 4, December 2008, pp. 736-54.

³⁴ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implication*, Complete revised English edition, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980, p. 117.

³⁵ S. Vatuk, 'Gifts and affines in north India'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), vol. 9, no. 2, July 1975, pp. 155-196.

³⁶ P. Mody, 'Love and the law: Love-marriage in Delhi'. *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1, February 2002, pp. 223-256.

village communities despite being inter-caste or inter-religious. Unlike regional marriages, there is no dowry in cross-regional marriage and the wedding expenses are met by the groom. Generally, some payment is also made to a go-between who arranges the marriage. This has resulted in the categorisation of cross-regional marriages as bride-buying and trafficking.³⁷

Cross-regional marriages have been described as a ‘new phenomenon’³⁸ and ‘hitherto undocumented’,³⁹ even though studies suggest that such marriages have a long history in the northern region.⁴⁰ Studies on cross-regional marriage note that while such marriages have existed historically, they are no longer ‘exceptional’⁴¹ with men of almost every caste bringing cross-regional brides⁴² and the influx of brides into the north Indian states increasing over the years.⁴³ I found that cross-regional marriages result from two sets of factors – one operating at bride-sending regions (mainly poverty) and the other at bride-receiving regions (masculine sex ratios and the difficulties some men have in achieving ‘eligibility’ for marriage due to unemployment or lack of salaried employment, landlessness or marginal landownership, individual characteristics such as disability, ‘flawed’ reputation or older age etc.). Elsewhere I have discussed that both bachelorhood and masculine sex ratios existed historically in this part of north India. The contemporary inability of some men to marry thus needs to be linked to wider changes in the political economy (changes in landholding patterns, livelihood strategies, education and white-collar employment). I argue that marriage strategies that worked in the past do not work in the present and cross-regional marriage is one of several strategies adopted in response to the difficulties being confronted nowadays.⁴⁴ This parallels other Asian contexts (China, South Korea and Taiwan) where demographic and social changes have rendered some men ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘unmarriageable’ within local contexts, resulting in bride import.⁴⁵

In the following pages, I discuss the stories of two women, contrasting cases of regional and cross-regional marriages, to highlight the significance of natal kin support in situations of marital violence.

³⁷ See S. Chaudhry, *Lived Experiences of Marriage: Regional and Cross-Regional Brides in Rural North India*. Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Edinburgh: UK, 2016; Kaur, ‘Across region marriages’ on why this categorisation is problematic; see also Constable, *Cross-border Marriages* for a discussion of the categorisation of women in cross-border/transnational commercially-mediated marriages as mail-order brides, commodities or trafficked women.

³⁸ Kukreja and Kumar, *Tied in a Knot*, p. 5.

³⁹ Kaur, ‘Across region marriages’, p. 2595-6.

⁴⁰ M. Darling, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt*, Manohar, Delhi, 1977; Jeffery and Jeffery, *Don’t Marry me to a Plowman!*; G. G. Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual, Prestation and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago; London, 1988.

⁴¹ S. Chaudhry and T. D. Mohan, ‘Of marriage and migration: Bengali and Bihari brides in a UP village’. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, October 2011, p. 312.

⁴² Kaur, ‘Across-region marriages’, p. 2595.

⁴³ P. Mishra, ‘Sex ratios, cross-region marriages and the challenges to caste endogamy in Haryana’. *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 48, no. 35, August 2013, pp. 70-78.

⁴⁴ S. Chaudhry, ‘Now it is difficult to get married: Contextualizing cross-regional marriage and bachelorhood in a north Indian village’, in *Scarce Women and Surplus Men in China and India: Macro Demographics versus Local Dynamics*. S. Srinivasan and S. Li (eds), Springer, forthcoming.

⁴⁵ Davin, ‘Marriage migration in China and East Asia’; H. Min and J.S. Eades, ‘Brides, bachelors and brokers: The marriage market in rural Anhui in an era of economic reforms’. *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 29, no. 4, October 1995, pp. 841-869; H. Lee, ‘Political economy of cross-border marriage: Economic development and social reproduction in Korea’. *Feminist Economics*, vol. 18, no. 2, April 2012, pp. 177-200; Williams, *Global Marriage*.

Sarla: seeking refuge in marital crisis

When I first met Sarla, 47, a Jat regional bride, she had been married for 32 years. She had completed her secondary school education and had been settled in marriage by her parents at the age of 16 to Biram, a farmer, who was 10 years older than her. She returned to live at her *sasurāl* two years later at *gaunā* (cohabitation). During one of our conversations she said, ‘in my next life, I hope I am not born a woman and if I am, I will not get married’. She described the time she spent at her in-laws’ as years of her husband’s infidelity, beating and fighting. She was beaten most often at the provocation of her husband’s widowed *chāchī* (father’s younger brother’s wife), with whom her husband had started a sexual relationship shortly after Sarla’s wedding.⁴⁶ ‘When I was pregnant with my son, she would make my husband kick me in the stomach so that I would have a miscarriage’. Sarla talked about her excessive workload and the constant taunts about ‘not bringing enough gifts from her natal home’. She described at length the abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband’s *chāchī*: ‘The day my son was born there was no one with me. When I started having pains, I told her to call the midwife. She said to me: “When a *kuttiyā* (bitch) gives birth, no one comes to help her, she gives birth on her own”.’

Subsequently, Sarla lived in her *pīhar* for 16 years, returning only for brief durations in that period because she was aware that eventually she would have to return to her *sasurāl*. ‘My parents and brothers are there in my *pīhar* but once my brothers grow old, they will be dependent on their children. You think their children would ask after us?’ She returned to Barampur when her son was 17. ‘When my son was 16, someone in my natal village told him that he was a grown man capable of working and feeding himself and his mother. From then on, my son started insisting that he wanted to return to Barampur’. She added that she had no trouble while she was living at her *pīhar* but she was aware that her son and she had no rights there. ‘I felt *sharm* (shame) living there. The villagers would ask my mother, for how long will she stay here’.

Sarla had resisted her parents’ attempts to remarry her. ‘If happiness was in my destiny, I would have been happy in this marriage’, she remarked. A remarriage, she added, would also have required her to leave her son behind at her in-laws. ‘They would beat him every day...what kind of a life would he have? He would curse me...how could I be happy?’ During my fieldwork, Sarla had been in Barampur for 11 years. When she returned, her brothers negotiated with her in-laws, and her son was given his share of the property. Sarla and her son set up a separate household and she no longer had to live in the extended joint family where she had lived before as a young bride. For the first eight years after returning to Barampur, Sarla had no contact with her husband. She told me that it was possible for her to live at her *sasurāl* without him for so long only because she had the support of an adult son. Her husband started visiting the household that Sarla shared with her adult unmarried son on a daily basis three years prior to my fieldwork. She explained that she resumed contact with her husband and ‘tolerated’ him only because her separated status would hinder her son’s marriage prospects.

⁴⁶ Dube points out that concerns around caste purity and paternity in patrilineal societies make policing the sexuality of unattached women – unmarried, divorced/separated and widowed a priority. In Barampur, remarriage of widows was permitted across castes and was explained by anxieties about their sexual availability. The relationship between Sarla’s husband and his *chāchī* was brought up by several informants who commented that women formed ‘inappropriate’ relationships when unattached. See L. Dube, ‘Seed and earth: Symbolism of biological reproduction and sexual relations of production’, in *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development*, L. Dube, E. Leacock and S. Ardener (eds), Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986, p. 22.

Kalawati: the absence of natal kin in marital crisis

In the late 1980s, Kalawati, a cross-regional bride from Silchar in Assam, had travelled over 2000 kilometers to Barampur as the wife of Ompal, a Kumhar who worked as a potter for part of the year and in the brick-kilns for the other. She was about 40 when I first met her. She had six children: two sons and four daughters. She talked about being very young when she got married and recalled that she had not attained puberty at the time. Her marriage was arranged by Hemlata, her mother's sister's daughter, who was married in Barampur several years prior to Kalawati's wedding. About her natal home she said:

There is a lot of poverty there. I was the youngest of my siblings. My sisters got married then my mother passed away. I was nine at the time. We had no contact with my father. I had two older brothers. They worked at the tea plantations. I worked at the house of the manager of the plantation. I used to cook and look after his children. At home, my brother's wives made me work the entire day. It made me very angry. Then Hemlata sent a letter to my brother asking him to send me here. She said that I will never go hungry. The wedding took place in Assam... When I was on the train, I understood how far it is... it took three days to get here. I wondered if I will ever be able to go back again.

About the move to Barampur, Kalawati explained how different life in Barampur felt:

The first one year was very difficult. I felt alone. I could not understand the language. In Silchar, we ate rice three times a day but here they eat *rotī* [Indian bread] for all meals. We used wood to cook. Here they cook on a *chulhā* [open stove fuelled by dung cakes]. There women wore *sārīs*. Here they wear suit-salwar or a long shirt with a *dhoti/sārī*. There they do not observe *ghūnghat* [veiling]...

Kalawati had not visited her natal home for over 20 years. She had visited only once – three months after her wedding when she returned to arrange a marriage for her husband's younger brother. Her brother visited her in Barampur once when her second child was six years old. She told me:

Earlier my heart would ache thinking about my natal kin. I would tell him [husband] to take me once to meet my family but he never did because he did not want to spend money. He would say we will go on *Diwālī*, on *Holī* [Hindu festivals] ...he kept putting it off with excuses. Then I gave up hope. I no longer think about my family because my parents are not there. I received a letter a few years ago about my elder brother's death and I do not know if my younger brother is still alive. If I go, where will I go? My brother's children were young when I left...they must have grown up now...they will not recognise me.

She said that before Hemlata (the go-between for this marriage) was widowed, Hemlata's husband wrote letters to Kalawati's brothers and would read the letters her brothers sent to her. She was illiterate but her daughter was educated. Yet she could not ask her daughter to write letters as Hemlata had lost Kalawati's brother's address: 'I feel sad that I never go, there is no news from there and letters don't come'. In our last meeting she told me:

I told you that my only problem was that my natal family was not with me but what I did not say was that I have been very unhappy...my husband is not nice. He never supported me. After I had two children, he started troubling me. He used to beat me a lot. He would beat me and leave me on the main road and tell me to go away from here. I do not have a *pīhar*, so I cannot go and complain to my brothers. If they were close, even I would go and stay at my

pīhar for a few days...He [husband] can do whatever he wants. I have nowhere to go to. I have to work and feed myself and pass my days here...My elder son has grown up but he cannot say anything to his father because he is afraid. I hope my younger son will be different.

Discussion

Visits to the natal home were a way in which regional brides in Barampur maintained contact with their natal kin. Visits were particularly crucial in the early months for new brides as they eased the process of transition from *pīhar* to *sasurāl* and adjustment in a new household, as noted by earlier studies.⁴⁷ Women could, as Sarla's case demonstrates, also seek the intervention of natal kin in situations of marital distress. Most women started their married lives living in a joint household and later on became nuclear, usually when their husbands' brothers got married and had children. Violence instigated by affinal, especially female affinal kin within the extended household, was an experience shared by several women in Barampur.⁴⁸ As in Sarla's case, women's marital difficulties often related to the husband's infidelity, his repeated or excessive beating, verbal abuse, dowry-related harassment or continued demands made by their husbands and/or their kin on their natal kin for goods or cash aimed at enhancing the conjugal fund. In such circumstances, women turned to their natal kin.

A woman's natal kin would first attempt to talk to her husband and in-laws to negotiate better treatment for her. If they failed, the daughter could be taken back to her *pīhar* until her husband or a relative from her *sasurāl* came to collect her and promised better treatment in future.⁴⁹ Women pointed out that they could seek refuge at their *pīhar* only temporarily but they could not live there permanently. Eventually they had to return to their *sasurāl*. If reconciliation proved impossible, a woman would be remarried: she was highly unlikely to remain at her *pīhar* as an unattached woman due to concerns around her 'untied' sexuality. Of the nineteen regional brides interviewed, nine said that they had sought refuge at their *pīhar* at some stage of their married lives, with the period of refuge varying from a fortnight to a year or two, with Sarla's case being an exception.

For cross-regional brides, separated from their natal kin by over 500 miles, visiting was possible but distance and expenses made seeking natal kin intervention impossible. Studies on cross-regional marriages argue that 'bought brides' were unlikely to or were not allowed to visit or maintain contact with their natal kin.⁵⁰ Some others show that cross-regional brides maintained contact and visited their natal homes, even if not frequently.⁵¹ In Barampur, cross-regional brides could be placed in three categories as far as natal kin contact was concerned. *First*, those who had made visits to their natal homes more than once and talked to me about an impending visit. Most cross-regional brides could be placed in this category. *Second* are brides who had visited once but had not been to their natal homes for several years. In the *third* category are cross-regional brides who never returned to their natal homes to visit and had no contact with their families. Kalawati was in the second category.

⁴⁷ Vatuk, 'Trends in north Indian urban kinship'; Jacobson, 'Flexibility in north Indian kinship and residence'; Palriwala, 'Transitory residence and invisible work'; Jeffery and Jeffery, *Don't Marry me to a Plowman!*

⁴⁸ See also N. Mirza, 'South Asian women's experience of abuse by female affinal kin: A critique of mainstream conceptualisations of domestic abuse'. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, vol. 10, March 2015, pp. 1-17.

⁴⁹ See also Jeffery and Jeffery, *Don't Marry me to a Plowman!*; Jeffery, 'A uniform customary code?'

⁵⁰ Blanchet, 'Bangladeshi girls sold as wives in North India'; Jeffery et al., *Labour Pains and Labour Power*; P. Chowdhry, 'Crisis of masculinity in Haryana: The unmarried, the unemployed and the aged'. *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40, no. 49, December 2005, pp. 5189-5198.

⁵¹ Chaudhry and Mohan, 'Of marriage and migration'; Kaur, 'Across-region marriages'; Mishra, 'Sex ratios, cross-region marriages and the challenges to caste endogamy in Haryana'.

Writing on inter-provincial marriages in China, Davin argued that a migrant bride could counter her isolation in her husband's home by recruiting other women from her kinship circle and natal home.⁵² Additionally, arranging a marriage served as an incentive for a cross-regional bride to visit her natal home. It was the only reason why Kalawati had been able to visit home. When I first met her, it had been over two decades since her last and only visit and the ties with her natal kin were eventually withered.

For most cross-regional brides in the first two categories the first visit took place only after they had had their first child, due to concerns that they might not return. For them, as Kalawati explains, marriage meant not only territorial dislocation over a very large distance but adjustment in a context which was culturally and linguistically alien. They had to learn a new language and adopt the way of life, dress and food habits of the community where they were married. This accommodation process was intensified by isolation from their natal kin. Abraham similarly noted the isolation experienced by recent Indian immigrant brides in the US, 'in perception and in reality, a woman feels that she is emotionally and socially alone, economically constrained and culturally disconnected'.⁵³

In situations of marital conflict, cross-regional brides, unlike brides like Sarla, could not rely on their natal kin to step in. Only once they arrived in Barampur had they fathomed the distance separating them from their natal kin. As Schein notes in her study of inter-provincial marriages in China, 'what they had not comprehended, or bargained for, was the sheer physicality of space that made home so far away'.⁵⁴ In her work on domestic violence among cross-regional brides in Haryana, Ahlawat found that cross-regional brides who were more educated and geographically closer to their natal homes could leave violent marriages and return to their families.⁵⁵ By contrast, my cross-regional bride informants had neither sought refuge nor considered returning permanently to their natal homes. They were clear that it was not an option for them. When parents give daughters in a cross-regional marriage due to compulsions of poverty, keeping a daughter who returns not to visit but to stay, was anyway impossible. For brides like Kalawati, who had lost contact with her family, there was in fact nowhere to go, even temporarily. Regional brides were thus comparatively better off.

Not all regional brides, however, had the same opportunities to draw on natal kin support. Sarla stressed that the only reason she spent so many years at her *pīhar* was because her parents were willing to support her but added that not all parents keep a daughter who returns to them. She talked about Anita, her *devrānī* (husband's younger brother's wife), who was also mistreated by her in-laws and beaten by her husband just as Sarla was. 'Anita's mother told her: there are so many corners in the house in your *sasurāl*, no matter what happens find one corner to die in, but do not come back here'. It was not that Anita's mother did not want to support her but rather that other factors – the death of male kin and financial constraints – made providing support difficult. This had not always been the case, for Anita had sought refuge at her *pīhar* for as long as two years while her father and brother were alive. Following their death, Anita's widowed mother and sister-in-law were themselves struggling to make ends meet in the absence of a 'provider'. Her natal home was only 12 kilometers away, yet like Kalawati, Anita had 'nowhere to go to when the beating was

⁵² D. Davin. 'Marriage migration in China: The enlargement of marriage markets in the era of market reforms', in *Marriage, Migration and Gender*, R. Paliwala and P. Uberoi (eds), Sage, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 63-77.

⁵³ Abraham, 'Domestic violence and the Indian diaspora in the United States', p. 314.

⁵⁴ Schein, 'Marrying out of Place', p. 62.

⁵⁵ N. Ahlawat, 'The dark side of the marriage squeeze: Violence against cross-region brides in Haryana', in *Too Many Men, Too Few Women: Social Consequences of Gender Imbalance in India and China*, R. Kaur (ed), Orient Black Swan, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 197-219.

excessive'. She could visit but no longer seek refuge. Most women spoke of the natal home as the *parental* home and they regarded the death of parents (and fathers in particular) as a defining change in their relationship with their natal kin.

I asked women about support structures available to them in their conjugal village, especially in situations where their natal kin were unwilling or unable to offer support. Earlier studies note that women created fictive kin relationships with other women with whom they could trace ties back to their natal villages. They also established 'adoptive' relationships with a household in their affinal village that then took on 'all the customary ritual obligations and costs entailed by natal kin'.⁵⁶ In Barampur, several women (regional and cross-regional brides alike) talked about receiving emotional support and at times even financial help from other women of their own or other castes. Kalawati talked about relying on Hemlata (her 'sister') from the early years. Maya, mid-40s, another cross-regional bride told me, 'here there are many who support me'. When her husband beat her, her neighbour, an elderly woman, would intervene and make him stop. I asked her if the beating stopped as a result and she said, 'it did on the day'. Neighbours did not usually intervene in this way, especially young women who were equally powerless within their own households. Yet at times they did help in other ways. Urmila, 32, a Jat regional bride, was beaten by her husband on one occasion. Her neighbours informed her natal kin and her father and brother came to Barampur the following day and took her to her *pīhar*. She stayed at her *pīhar* for six months thereafter.

The weakening of the brother-sister tie and not wanting to be a 'burden' (referring to economic dependence on married brothers) emerged in other women's accounts, as well as Sarla's, when talking about accessing support. Women often talked about their fear that their brother and his wife would complain about maintaining them. Sarla was clear that this was not an issue for her (during her period of refuge), yet she did comment that her brothers and their wives would have to negotiate the inter-generational contract as old age support from their own children may not necessarily materialize. Thus Sarla could not expect long-term support from her brother's children. Sarla, like other regional brides, deeply valued the material support provided by their natal families. They received gifts on visits, festivals and life-cycle rituals and this continued into the next generation at their children's weddings. They cited instances of other kinds of monetary support extended by their natal kin towards their own or their children's medical treatments or during a husband's unemployment. By contrast, cross-regional brides said that their parents were too poor to offer them any financial support.

When Sarla talks about her son and herself having no rights in her natal home, she means rights to parental property – in particular land, house and other productive property. Although post-independence legislation gave a daughter a right of inheritance in her parents' property (and from 2005 in the father's share in ancestral property), women do not usually claim their share, for numerous reasons, including: avoiding rifts with brothers on whom they may have to rely for support, keeping their natal family prosperous by not claiming their share, and the belief that they were entitled to dowry and gifts rather than house or landed property.⁵⁷ Some regional brides said they returned to their *sasurāl* after seeking refuge at their *pīhar* because their children had rights to and could inherit only their father's property. The significance of a married woman's rights in parental property is highlighted by Abraham in her work on a formerly matrilineal caste group in Kerala. She points out that a woman's

⁵⁶ H. Lambert, 'Sentiments and substance in north Indian forms of relatedness', in *Cultures of Relatedness: New Approaches to the Study of Kinship*, J. Carsten (ed), 2000, p. 78; Raheja and Gold. *Listen to the Heron's Words*.

⁵⁷ S. Basu, '*Haklenewali*: Indian women's negotiations of discourses of inheritance', in *Dowry and Inheritance*, S. Basu (ed), Women Unlimited, New Delhi, 2005, p. 153.

right to share in the property ensured that she could return to her natal home.⁵⁸ Sarla explained that she had not disregarded her ties with her brothers by claiming rights to what was ‘theirs’, so she could continue to draw on their support (material and emotional) even after she returned to Barampur.

Sarla talks about feeling shame while living at her *pīhar* because after marriage a woman’s rightful place is in her *sasurāl* and not her *pīhar*. On marriage, a woman is ‘given away’ and believed to become ‘someone else’s property’, so natal kin intervention is problematic and parents had to exercise restraint in interfering in a daughter’s marital difficulties, even if she lived nearby. Women also hesitated in approaching their natal kin calling them only in crisis situations or as one informant put it ‘*zyādā pareshānī*’ (extreme difficulty) and not for daily conflicts in the *sasurāl*. Sakeena, a 43 year Teli regional bride, said, ‘my mother told me, a woman who cares for her parents’ honour does not return to her *pīhar* in a fight. She makes her marriage work’. Similarly, Jeffery observed in her work in Bijnor that a woman was blamed for marital breakdown – for not adjusting in her in-laws’ home and for bringing shame to her natal family.⁵⁹ Notions of honour and shame were so deeply ingrained that some women talked about never confiding in their natal kin about their marital troubles.⁶⁰ Further, a woman’s separated status was stigmatised and this not only affected the marriage prospects of her unmarried siblings⁶¹ but also, as Sarla points out, those of her children.

Like Sarla, other women explained that they returned to their *sasurāl* rather than leaving permanently, as that would have meant remarriage. They did not want to risk finding themselves in an even more unfavourable situation.⁶² Kajri, 35, a Jat regional bride, remarked, ‘What if the second one turned out to be worse than my husband. What would I do then? Where would I go?’⁶³ Leaving permanently would also have meant leaving children, especially sons, behind with the in-laws and this inhibited women from leaving even when they experienced immense difficulties. In fact some, like Kalawati, felt that the violence increased once children were born as husbands felt assured that their wives would not leave. Further, women explained that even if they left with their children, the second husband may not accept another man’s children or grant them inheritance rights. This is the crucial difference from other contexts (such as the UK) where women are legally protected (and are also assumed) to take their children with them in the event of marital breakdown.⁶⁴

It is therefore necessary to stress that although regional brides talked about refuge as temporary and the inevitability of return to the *sasurāl*, it becomes particularly vital in moments of marital distress. It alone offers women the possibility to recoup and return to their marriages or of intervention to negotiate a better situation, as Sarla’s case illustrates. When Sarla first left to live at her *pīhar*, her brothers were young and her son an infant. When she

⁵⁸ J. Abraham, ‘Why did you send me like this?: Marriage, matriliney and the providing husband in north Kerala, India’. *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, January 2011, pp. 32-65.

⁵⁹ Jeffery and Jeffery, *Don’t Marry me to a Plowman!*; Jeffery, ‘A uniform customary code?’ p. 18.

⁶⁰ Qureshi was told by her Pakistani informants in Britain that when a daughter leaves her parents’ home on her wedding palanquin, the parents say, ‘this is your dead body leaving the house’, so that she never thinks to return. Qureshi, *Marital Breakdown among British Asians*, p. 127.

⁶¹ K. Charsley, ‘Vulnerable brides and transnational *ghar damads*: Gender, risk and adjustment among Pakistani marriage migrants to Britain’, in *Marriage, Migration and Gender*, R. Palriwala and P. Uberoi, (eds), Sage, New Delhi, 2008, pp. 152-179; Jeffery, ‘A uniform customary code?’

⁶² See also Grover, *Love, Caste and Kinship Support*.

⁶³ Grover noted that cautionary discourses about remarriage were widespread in Delhi and secondary marriages often meant more peril for women. See *Love, Caste and Kinship Support*.

⁶⁴ See Qureshi, *Marital Breakdown among British Asians*.

returned more than a decade later, she had the support of adult brothers and a son. Sarla's story would have followed a different trajectory if her only child had been a daughter and not a son. As women's 'femaleness and their sexuality is to be controlled by fathers, husbands and sons',⁶⁵ without a son, Sarla could not have lived in an independent household in her *sasurāl* as a separated woman. The only single-women households in Barampur were those of elderly sonless widows with married daughters. Also, a daughter would not be given the right to land that a son could claim. The opportunity to exercise agency would not have been available to Sarla but for the support of her natal kin and an adult son. By contrast, Kalawati had neither.

I now move on to the stories of Priti and Radha to illustrate the role of natal kin in negotiating remarriage for separated/divorced and widowed women. I emphasize that natal kin support is not only crucial for married women, but at times a life-and-death matter, as the cases of suicide and attempted suicide below demonstrate.

Priti: marital breakdown and leaving permanently

Priti, a Chamar regional bride, was married in 2009 at the age of 18. She was the oldest of four siblings – three sisters and a brother. She dropped out of school after class eight and had worked with her family at the brick-kiln since the age of 12. During my fieldwork, Priti was separated from her husband and had been living at her *pīhar* in Barampur for three years. She talked about the anger she felt towards her father who had 'forced' her into a marriage at the behest of his sister. Priti's mother and brother, too, had not been in favour of this match and her mother Kusum talked to me about the 'wrong decision' that her husband Satender had made in haste. Priti had stayed with her husband, a drug addict, for just over a month following the wedding. Her husband had been in a relationship with his *bhābī* (elder brother's wife), something Priti learnt about soon after she moved to live at her *sasurāl*.

For the first year, her in-laws made several attempts at a reconciliation and Priti did return briefly to live at her *sasurāl*. She talked about the violence she experienced and repeatedly told me that she did not want to remarry and would not. Her mother, Kusum, asserted that Priti had no choice but to remarry: 'after we are dead, her brother will not keep her', she added. Kusum said Priti would be remarried once her court case was settled. In cases of separation and marital breakdown, court intervention was not usually sought. In this instance, though, a case had been filed in court so that the dowry could be retrieved. Priti's father, Satender wanted to marry Priti to an unmarried man and this, he explained, was not possible without a dowry. For Priti's parents, poor brick-kiln workers, arranging a dowry for her first marriage had been an enormous strain and something they could not do again. Her remarriage was thus 'delayed', with Satender making numerous visits to the district court during the course of my fieldwork to resolve the dowry issue.

Kusum was aware that Priti had become a source of gossip among other Chamar families because she was contributing to their household sustenance. I heard Chamar informants remark that Priti's parents were 'living off her earnings' and hence were 'content with keeping her unmarried'. I also heard rumours that suggested that Priti was 'loose' and was 'roaming with various men' and that her parents were 'tired' of her. The pressure to remarry her was constant because Priti's two younger sisters were of marriageable age and a

⁶⁵ S. Wadley, 'No Longer a wife: Widows in rural North India', in *From The Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion and Culture*, L. Harlan and P. Courtright (eds), Oxford University Press, New York, Oxford, 1995, p. 4.

dowry had to be arranged for each of them. Satender also talked about investing in house repair and construction so that they could attract a marriage proposal for their son aged 25, who they believed would soon become ‘over-age’ for marriage. Priti was remarried in October 2014, a year after I completed fieldwork, even though her court case had not been settled. A month later, I learnt from Satender’s relative that Priti had committed suicide while she was visiting her *pīhar*. I had no further information until a year later. Priti had been married to a much older widower with grown children. This was a dowryless marriage, I was told. She had refused to return to her *sasurāl* when she came to Barampur to visit but was told by her father that they were no longer willing to keep her.

Discussion

Sarla and Priti had in common the infidelity and violence in their marital relationships and the refuge they sought at their natal homes because of this. Yet, unlike Sarla, Priti had failed to resist her remarriage because reconciliation with her husband proved impossible. As a young woman without children and at the prime of the sexual and reproductive phase of her life, she could not be left unmarried. The rumours about Priti’s supposed promiscuity reveal the fear of single women’s sexuality that is not controlled through marriage. At the same time, the fear of gossip serves to ensure conformity. Interestingly, for the entire duration of my fieldwork, even though Priti was residing in her *pīhar* and hence did not have to observe *purdah* restrictions, she mostly remained within the household.

As with Sarla, the caste and class status of Priti’s natal family affected her life trajectory. In several women’s accounts, the economic situation of their natal families emerged as important in their assessments of seeking natal kin support. Four women said that they did not confide in their natal kin about their marital troubles because they realised that their kin were extremely poor and would be unable to offer them refuge. Jagmati, a Chamar regional bride in her early 60s, remarked, ‘even if I could call on them in *pareshānī* (difficulty), for how long can your *pīharwāle* intervene?’, alluding to the limits of natal kin support. Sarla’s family could keep her as she belonged to a family of wealthy Jat farmers, yet as a Jat woman she had never worked for a wage due to status concerns.⁶⁶ Thus she felt like a burden on her natal kin. Priti’s case was different. Following marital breakdown and her return to her *pīhar*, she continued to work in the brick-kiln with her natal family as she had as an unmarried woman. Even though she did not have an independent income, she was earning and contributing to the household income. She was not a ‘burden’ on her natal kin in the same way that Sarla felt she was. Yet as Grover noted for her Balmiki (sweeper) informants in Delhi, even when women have secure employment (jobs in the Municipality in her study) they remain dependent on men for their survival.⁶⁷ Women do not inherit property and have no rights to the marital home after marital breakdown. Their dowry is believed to be their share but this cannot provide any long-term economic security. Thus, it was not economically viable for separated women like Priti to live independently.

In Barampur, marital breakdown and separation was generally not formalised through legal divorce and informal modes of mediation were deployed. In some parts of rural north India, *caste panchayats* exercise considerable power, including on matters related to marriage.⁶⁸ In Barampur, however, the hold of caste panchayats had weakened and marital

⁶⁶ See V. Das, ‘Indian women: Work, power and status’, in *Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity*, B. R. Nanda, (ed), Vikas, Delhi, 1976, pp. 129-145.

⁶⁷ Grover, *Love, Caste and Kinship Support*.

⁶⁸ P. Chowdhry, *Contentious Marriages, Eloping Couples: Gender, Caste and Patriarchy in Northern India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2007.

disputes were no longer settled by them. Such disputes were mediated by family and caste elders and at times by an influential member of the village community. Writing on family mediation among British Pakistanis, Qureshi notes that some scholars view it in a negative light, seeing it as a pressure on women to stay in unhappy marriages. She argues that ‘family mediation does not uniformly encourage women to patiently endure unhappy marriages...if the husband is found to be at fault, they may well be supported to leave’.⁶⁹ My findings echo Qureshi’s. She illustrates how people who leave marriages do so not as ‘autonomous individuals, but supported by their kin’.⁷⁰ Natal kin support had made it possible for Priti to leave a violent marriage. Yet at the same time, her case highlights the limits of natal kin support. Even though her family wanted to keep her, they were bound by local normative structures and social pressures (such as gossip that it was her parents’ self-interest that delayed her remarriage),⁷¹ and the future marriage of her brother and especially her sisters for whom dowries had to be arranged. In Priti’s case, the withdrawal of parental support can be explained by this family’s strategies for their other children’s futures and their struggle to move forward.

In Barampur, neither in primary nor in secondary marriages, did women have a say in who and if at all to (re) marry. This differs from Grover’s observations for her low caste informants in urban Delhi where the exercise of choice on entering secondary unions is more permissible and the norm of caste endogamy may be breached.⁷² Priti was settled in a secondary marriage with a much older man that she did not want yet could not resist. Her parents did not have the means to offer permanent refuge. In the absence of alternatives, the possibility of marrying her without a dowry had seemed to them like the only option. Priti’s mother also talked about the obligation to remarry her while her parents were still alive. She talked about the brother-sister relationship changing once brothers get married. Moreover, she pointed out that the need to earn and provide for a family for poor men like her son meant that support from her brother may not be forthcoming for Priti in future. Kamlesh’s case demonstrates this.

Kamlesh, a Kumhar regional bride in her late 20s, felt that she could not rely on her brothers for support. On one occasion, she returned to her natal home after being beaten ‘excessively’ by her husband and was asked by her brothers to leave, something she said would not have happened while her father was alive. ‘They are very poor and have children of their own. My mother is always ill and they spend a lot on her treatment. They cannot say anything to my husband because where will they keep me?’ The cases of both Kamlesh and Priti show that even regionally marrying brides cannot rely on or assume natal kin support and that its absence can be devastating for a woman. When Priti became aware of the limits of parental support – that they could no longer keep her, leave her unmarried or settle her in a third marriage – the inescapability of her situation made her commit suicide. Kamlesh told me that her husband became more violent once he realised that she had nowhere to go to. In her work on domestic abuse among Indian immigrant brides in the US, Abraham noted that ‘frequently the abuser’s knowledge that the woman is isolated and that he has no social

⁶⁹ Qureshi, *Marital Breakdown among British Asians*, p. 102, 124.

⁷⁰ Qureshi, *Marital Breakdown among British Asians*, p. 95.

⁷¹ This resonates with Grover’s study where men whose wives had gone back to their natal homes complained that their in-laws were treating their daughters as an economic resource and overlooking their daughters’ long-term interests in their *sasurāl*.

⁷² Grover, *Love, Caste and Kinship Support*. See also J. Parry, ‘Ankalu’s errant wife: Sex, marriage and industry in contemporary Chhattisgarh’. *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 4, October 2001, pp. 783-820.

accountability exacerbates the situation'.⁷³ This was the case not only for my cross-regional bride informants but also for regional brides like Kamlesh.

Having compared natal kin support in situations of marital violence and breakdown for regionally and cross-regionally married women, I will now present the case study of a cross-regional bride to discuss the role of natal kin in the event of widowhood and the implications of its absence.

Radha: widowhood and the absence of support

Radha was a cross-regional bride in her early 40s from a village in Giridih district of Jharkhand. In the mid-1980s, she travelled to Barampur, over a distance of 1500 kilometers, following her marriage to Jaipal, a Chamar brick-kiln worker. Radha said that she was about 14-16 years at the time of her wedding and her husband was 'much older'. She explained that her widowed mother agreed to the marriage because of poverty and the offer of a dowryless marriage. Her marriage was arranged through the husband of a cross-regional bride (also from Giridih) married in Barampur. About her marriage Radha said: 'It was how God decided'.

Radha had five children – two daughters and three sons. She worked at the brick-kiln with her husband since her marriage. Talking about her first experience at the brick-kiln she commented, 'before I came here, I had not even seen a brick-kiln in my dreams'. Like several other cross-regional brides in Barampur, Radha had maintained contact with her natal family post-marriage through visits, even though not frequent. Once mobile phones became available, she used her husband's phone to call her natal family. Her brother had visited her twice in Barampur and had stayed for long durations to help with brick-kiln work. Her husband died in 2008 of tuberculosis. During my fieldwork, Radha lived in a household with her three minor sons (below the age of 10 years). Her two daughters were married at the ages of 17 and 19 just two months before I started fieldwork and had moved to live at their respective *sasurāls* in a neighbouring district.

After her husband's death, Radha had continued to work at the brick-kiln for six to eight months of the year. She talked about the hardships of brick-kiln work. For the remaining months, she worked as a casual agricultural labourer in the village when work was available. She had stopped receiving her widow's pension in 2012 with a change in state government. She had no savings as she had spent whatever she had on her daughters' weddings. Poverty had forced her to withdraw her sons from school. As brick-kiln work depends on family labour, Radha had found it difficult to work in the brick-kiln since her husband died. She had been coping with her two older daughters, but was anxious about the following season as her daughters were now married and she could not work at the brick-kiln on her own. She had been desperately looking for alternative employment and talked about being ill for over a year. 'Since my husband died, I have been worried about how I will feed my children', she told me.

Radha had lost contact with her natal family after her husband's death. She had lost the mobile phone number and said that she could not visit them since there was no one who could accompany her. She was illiterate and felt incapable of finding her way independently over such a distance and the cost of travel made visiting difficult. 'Where is a poor person to get the money from?' she said. Her husband's younger brother lived with his family in the adjoining household, but she said that she could not rely on their support. Ten months after I first met her, Radha attempted to elope with an unmarried Jat man, also from Barampur, but

⁷³ Abraham, 'Domestic violence and the Indian diaspora in the United States', p. 315; see also Qureshi, *Marital Breakdown among British Asians*.

had failed. She was brought back by her husband's relatives. Following this, Radha attempted suicide.

Discussion

Radha's and Kalawati's cases both highlight how the tyranny of (geographic) distance limits the amount and type of support cross-regional brides can access from their natal kin. Initially Radha had visited her natal home a few times after her wedding, yet over the course of her married life, with a change in circumstances, distance and the cost of travel had made sustaining relations with her natal family difficult.

During my fieldwork, almost every household in Barampur owned a mobile phone. Although the mobile was family or common property mostly in the control of men rather than a woman's personal communication device,⁷⁴ it was highly valued by married women as it facilitated contacts with the natal home. Regional brides pointed out that even though visits to the natal home became less frequent over time, they used the mobile phone to communicate with their natal families (including their married sisters) at least a few times a month. Radha and most of the other cross-regional brides who had been in Barampur for over 20 years, explained that prior to mobile phones, visits to the natal home had been the only way to maintain contact with their natal families. Varsha, 28, a cross-regional bride, explained that the occasional calls she made to her mother from the phone booth in the village when she first arrived had constituted a major expense. This changed dramatically as cheap mobile phones became available. Nine of the nineteen cross-regional brides said that they kept in touch with their families by means of a mobile phone.

Kalawati had lost the address of her natal kin and no longer had contact with them. Similarly, for Radha, losing the mobile phone number of her natal family had made her kin drift away. Cross-regional brides like Lakshmi, late 40s, encountered other difficulties in maintaining communication. Lakshmi had moved from Bengal to Barampur in the early 1980s. She had visited her natal home a few times in the early years of marriage. Like most cross-regional brides she could no longer speak her native language. She said that her son owned a mobile phone but it made no difference, as her family could not speak Hindi and she could no longer speak Bengali.

As discussed earlier, being over the 'appropriate' age for marriage was one reason why men sought cross-regional brides. Some cross-regional brides said there was an age gap of 15 or more years between them and their husbands. Radha's *devar* (husband's younger brother), for instance, told me that his brother was in his late 40s when he went to marry her. Hemlata, also a cross-regional bride and a widow of a much older man, said that when her marriage was being negotiated her grandmother feared that 'her husband would die and she would be left a young widow'. Women often remarked that widowhood was a fate they would not wish on anyone as it meant a life of increased dependence and, for older widows, often neglect and the loss of power within the household.

As Chen and Drèze note, the consequences of patrilocal norms are particularly pronounced for widows because the support that a widow receives in her husband's village following his death is extremely limited.⁷⁵ Studies show that widowhood is marked by

⁷⁴ A. Doron, 'Mobile persons: cell phones, gender and the self in north India', *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 13, no. 5, November 2012, p. 426.

⁷⁵ M. A. Chen and J. Drèze, *Widows and Well-being in Rural North India*, Development Economics Research Programme, Suntory-Toyota International Centre for Economics and Related Disciplines, London, 1992, p. 4.

immense suffering and difficulty, especially for poor and landless women.⁷⁶ The provision of material support by a spouse emerged as particularly crucial in conversations with widowed informants, regional and cross-regional brides alike, who felt that the most difficult years were those following the death of husbands. Unlike upper caste women, Radha could work for a wage, yet she talked about feeling ‘burdened’ with the sole role of earning a livelihood and marrying her daughters, responsibilities her husband would have fulfilled if he were alive. Nor did she have natal kin to help her put together the dowries.⁷⁷

Generally a regional bride’s natal kin played a crucial role if she was widowed. Across castes, a widowed woman could be given in a *bithānā* marriage (levirate marriage) to her (generally) unmarried *jeth* (husband’s elder brother) or *devar* (husband’s younger brother) by her natal kin. This is also common in other parts of western UP, Punjab and Haryana.⁷⁸ She could also be remarried into a different family, although this was less common. Women in Barampur said that a remarriage was usually arranged for young widows, and not for older widows. As women were married at early ages, this referred not only to physiological age but more so to social age. Thus, it was not considered appropriate for a widow with grown children to marry. Widows reported having to remove all the accessories they had worn as married women but continued to wear one glass bangle if their brother was alive, highlighting the significance of the brother-sister relationship. In her work in a UP village, Wadley found a similar custom – married Hindu women wore two sets of toe rings on each foot, one for the husband and one for the brother. Following the death of either the husband or brother, one set was removed. It was believed that ‘if the husband’s protection, symbolically and economically, is lost, then a brother’s protection should replace it’.⁷⁹

Unlike Radha, Kajri, a 35 year old landless Jat widow, was a regional bride yet she found herself in a similar predicament. Her natal home was in a nearby village but contact with her married brother had been minimal after her parents’ death. Although Jat women were not involved in waged work, poverty and widowhood had forced Kajri to go out to work to feed her eight children. She often mentioned how her life would have been easier if her father were alive or her brother had, after her husband’s death, taken the responsibility to give her in marriage to her *devar* (husband’s younger brother). She believed this would have offered her respite from the hardships of earning a livelihood. Kajri’s *devar* had lived in the same household even while her husband was alive. Her desire to be tied to him in a socially-sanctioned union also had to do with the protection it would have offered her from gossip about her sexual availability.

Whether or not a woman had an adult son/s also affected how likely she was to access support from her natal kin. A widow who was not remarried usually remained in her *sasurāl* and relied on her son’s support. Marriage established a relationship of deference between affines, with it being unacceptable for the kin of the bride to accept hospitality at their daughter’s *sasurāl*. While a father and brother could and did visit her, it was not regarded

⁷⁶ Chen and Drèze, *Widows and Well-being in Rural North India*; S. Lamb, ‘Aging, gender and widowhood: Perspectives from rural West Bengal’. *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), vol. 33, no. 3, October 1999, pp. 540-570; Wadley, ‘No longer a wife’.

⁷⁷ Across castes, *bhāt* gifts were provided by a regional bride’s brother at her children’s weddings. It was seen as the support extended by a woman’s natal kin in the marriage of her children.

⁷⁸ P. Chowdhry, *The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana, 1880-1990*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994; P. Kolenda, ‘Widowhood among Untouchable Chuhars’, in *Concepts of Person: Kinship, Caste and Marriage in India*, A. Ostor, L. Fruzzetti and S. Barnett (eds), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 172-220; M.C. Pradhan, *The Political System of the Jats of Northern India*, Oxford University Press, London, 1966.

⁷⁹ Wadley, ‘No longer a wife’, p. 97.

appropriate for her mother to do so. A widowed mother was believed to have ‘no place or power’ in a married daughter’s home⁸⁰ and she had to remain with her son irrespective of how he treated her. Thus, it was considered unacceptable and shameful for a widow to move to live with her married daughter, who was ‘someone else’s property’. A married daughter was herself dependent on others (her husband and his kin) and hence was in no position to support her widowed mother, other than offer emotional support or care during illness. This highlights how some relationships (father, brothers, sons) can be a resource and others (daughters) not.

A woman without adult sons could return to live at her *pīthar*, but women said that it was rare that a widow returned to live with her brothers or parents permanently, as also noted by earlier studies.⁸¹ This also varied with caste, age and who there was in their natal families. Thus, sonless Jat widows remained in their *sasurāl* because of rights to their deceased husband’s land. Jagbiri, an elderly sonless Kumhar widow, pointed out that even her brothers had died and there was no one in her *pīthar* she could go to live with, so once she became incapable of caring for herself, she would have to move to live with one of her married daughters. Abha, 25, also a Chamar regional bride, was a much younger widow. She had three sons below the ages of 10 years, Abha had refused a remarriage because she feared that a second husband may not accept her children. She talked about moving to live at her *pīthar*, located 40 kilometers away, with her children until her sons were old enough to support her. Abha did not have the support of her husband’s brothers, yet she could rely on her father and male relatives to provide material support and temporary refuge. Abha’s kin had also played a significant role in securing her rights and those of her children when her husband’s brothers had tried to encroach on her husband’s share of the parental property. Radha had sons but, like Abha’s sons, they were young and not yet in a position to support her. As a cross-regional bride, however, Radha could not return temporarily to live at her *pīthar*, as Abha could.

In Barampur, three of the five widowed cross-regional bride informants were living jointly with their married sons. The remaining two, Radha and Devanti, both Chamar, from Giridih district and in their early 40s, each had two married daughters and three minor sons. During my fieldwork, Devanti eloped with another Chamar from the village and returned a few months later with a ‘court’ (registered) marriage certificate to live in Barampur as his wife. During our conversations, Radha condemned Devanti’s behaviour, comparing herself to Devanti and asserting her own respectability and honourable conduct. Yet a few months later Radha attempted to elope with a Jat man from the village, but, unlike Devanti, she failed in the attempt. Radha’s husband’s relatives had succeeded in preventing the union from materialising and asserted control over her (as she was ‘now their responsibility’ following her husband’s death), even though they had otherwise failed to act as kin to her.

Studies show that migrant brides who are cut off from their natal kin attempt to create ties with those who also came from back ‘home’.⁸² Cross-regional brides said that they felt happy when they met other brides from their native states and shared with them the experience of belonging to the same place even if they did not establish friendships with them. For them and regional brides alike, factors such as stage in the life-cycle and household composition influenced whether or not they could establish supportive relationships with

⁸⁰ K. Mand, ‘Marriage and migration through the life course: Experiences of widowhood, separation and divorce among transnational Sikh women’, in *Marriage, Migration and Gender*, R. Palriwala and P. Uberoi (eds), Sage, New Delhi, 2008, p. 290.

⁸¹ M. A. Chen, *Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi; New York, 2000; Lamb, ‘Aging, gender and widowhood’.

⁸² Davin, ‘Marriage migration in China’; Schein, ‘Marrying out of place’.

women outside their households.⁸³ Unlike some other cross-regional brides, however, Radha held a negative opinion about alternative support structures in the absence of kin. ‘No one is a friend here...there is no one who supports me’, she remarked. Over the course of almost a year of conversations, Radha’s sense of helplessness was striking. She was struggling with extreme poverty, ill health and trying to provide for her young children by herself. She had no rights to the labour of her married daughters, no help from her husband’s kin and no longer any natal kin to call on. Her situation sheds some light on why eloping and arranging a re-marriage for herself may, in her perception, have offered some escape from the hardships of her situation in the absence of support from an adult son, a husband or natal kin. Following her failed elopement, one informant commented: ‘she has disgraced herself in the eyes of the caste community’. This possibly intensified her isolation.

Conclusion: reiterating the significance of natal kin support

Natal kin contact is not sought on a day-to-day basis by married women. Their lives are located and lived in their affinal villages where their in-laws, husbands, children and work are. For women, marriage entails a reconfiguration of their social world and everyday social relationships. Once married, they are expected to exercise reserve in approaching their natal kin who are excluded from daily conflicts in the marital village. Yet natal kin contact is highly significant if we focus on the situations in which women call on their kin for support. Knowing that they could call on their natal kin gave most regional brides in Barampur assurance and a greater sense of (potential) rescue, particularly in situations of marital violence, breakdown and widowhood.

A focus on cross-regional marriage has helped to demonstrate how the vulnerabilities experienced by married women are heightened by the distance from their natal homes because they cannot seek intervention or refuge when in crisis. Yet the comparison between regional brides and cross-regional brides has also enabled me to show that natal kin support is complicated even for regional brides. The circumstances in which natal kin intervened were varied. Family strategies for the future, community norms and pressures, the composition of the natal family, the gender of children, caste, poverty, livelihood concerns and rights in the natal home influenced the duration and kind of support. Ideologies of honour and shame, the belief that a married woman’s rightful place is in her husband’s home, the awareness that parents were too poor to offer support and that the only alternative to leaving permanently was remarriage and leaving children behind prevented some from even seeking the intervention of their kin. These factors combined in complex ways to determine the extent to which support was available. Over time, the death of parents and the marriage of brothers marked a change in women’s relations with their natal families. The absence of male kin, especially fathers, left some regional brides without support. For such regional brides, like for cross-regional brides, their natal kin were absent as far as support was concerned. The absence of support exacerbated women’s difficulties.

In the context described in this article, women neither inherit their husbands’ nor their fathers’ property. Nor do they have an independent income that provides them with economic independence or the right of abode in the marital home in the event of marital breakdown. A life outside of marriage is not an option available to them. They are dependent on the protection of a father, husband or son for their survival. In marital crisis, neighbours can offer support, but not exit options. Women in Barampur do not have access to NGOs, women’s courts or state institutions. It is, then, only the support that a married woman has from her natal kin that can provide her with an option to leave, even if only temporarily. This may

⁸³ Chaudhry, *Lived Experiences of Marriage*.

enable her either to negotiate a better situation for herself, or simply provide her with the space to recuperate before returning to her marriage. Women's agency is thus highly dependent on their relations to others, both their personal relationships to their families, and the caste and economic relations in which they are embedded.

Recent studies on South Asian communities are analysing how social and economic transformations are impacting marital relations and drawing attention to the possibilities for agency in negotiating and leaving marriages and making consensual secondary unions. In Barampur, India's growth story is palpable only in terms of improved means of transport and communication, a declining sex ratio, an increased social and economic stress on women with migration of men or to brick kilns induced by poverty. Women still do not have opportunities to make 'strategic life choices'.⁸⁴ Sadly, very little has changed for women since Jeffery and Jeffery's study in a neighbouring district in the 1980s and early 90s.⁸⁵ A woman's natal kin remain her only resource when experiencing marital difficulty.

⁸⁴ N. Kabeer, 'Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment'. *Development and Change*, vol. 30, 1999, pp. 435-464.

⁸⁵ Jeffery et al., *Labour Pains and Labour Power*; Jeffery and Jeffery, *Don't Marry me to a Plowman!*; Jeffery, 'A uniform customary code?'